

# Brazilian Sign Language in Teaching degrees at the Universidade Federal do Maranhão/Brazil

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**Abstract**— *The primary goal of this article is to describe the context of the Brazilian sign language (Libras) in Teaching Degrees at Universidade Federal do Maranhão (Ufma). In this sense, we developed an exploratory research with a qualitative approach. Four professors who teach Libras for Teaching degrees and 98 students participated in this research. We collected the data through semi structured interviews with questions regarding the object investigated. Results revealed that, among the 17 teaching courses in the Dom Delgado campus, only five offered the Libras course for students. We observed the need for more clarification regarding the objectives of the Libras course, and considered its coursework inadequate for making students bilingual. Certain courses were offering the Libras course as optional instead of mandatory. Our findings correspond to the fact that good teacher qualification is extremely necessary to accomplish a bilingual education under the perspective of educational inclusion.*

**Keywords**— *Bilingualism, Inclusive education, Teaching-learning, Teaching degrees, Brazilian Sign Language.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Discussing the importance of the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) in teacher's education is necessary given that bilingual education pervades the instructor's actions. This is the key character for acquiring new knowledge, sharing experiences, and developing a critical sense. Therefore, we infer that operationalizing inclusive education enables both deaf and hearing students to learn and improve Libras in the Teaching degrees, only if they have a sufficient and adequate course load, as well as qualified professors in Libras and Portuguese, respectively. By comprehending such statement, we begin to conceive bilingual education as a real and possible modality that provides deaf students with an effective, dynamic, attractive, instigating and inclusive educational routine.

Studies by Skliar, Massone and Veinberg [1] signal that a bilingual and bicultural education must aim at creating a linguistic environment that enables deaf students to progress in terms of their cognitive abilities, guarantee the construction of a viable knowledge about the world and the opportunity for a qualitative and quantitative access to cultural and curricular information. As Brito [2] highlights, teaching must center on acquiring and developing the semantic system and concepts, since such a process facilitates deaf students' learning. Therefore, it is possible to understand the Portuguese language

particularities in consonance with the already acquired ones, in Libras.

It is important to highlight that the professor has a crucial role for an effective bilingual education, since it is through its strategies that methodologies in both languages can be developed regarding the access to new knowledge. Such affirmatives demonstrate the need for learning the Brazilian Sign Language in teaching degrees, because it is during this primary education that future professors have their first experiences with the special education public, including deaf students.

In the context of the bilingual education of the deaf person, through law nº 10.436 [3] of April 24 2002, the Brazilian Sign Language is officialized as the way of communication and expression in which the linguistic system of visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a linguistic system for transmitting ideas and facts, originating from the deaf people communities of Brazil.

The Brazilian Sign Language is a visual-spatial language, which responds to the demand for deaf and hearing people using it for communicating, learning, and sharing experiences. Through this law, the Executive Power and public institutions must also use Libras as a way of communicating to answer the demands of Brazilian deaf people.

Given these facts, educational public policies changed and through the Decree 5.626/2005 [4], Libras started being a mandatory discipline in all high school, teaching, pedagogy (teaching and bachelor's degrees), and phonoaudiology courses.

Art. 3º Libras must be inserted as a mandatory curricular discipline in the teacher training courses for exercising magisterium in high school and higher education, and in the courses of speech, from public and private teaching institutions of the Federal, State, Federal District, and Municipality education systems.

§ 1º All teaching degrees, in all knowledge fields, the regular courses of high school and higher educational levels, the Pedagogy and Special Education courses are considered training courses for teachers and education professionals to exercise the magisterium. § 2º Libras will constitute an elective discipline for the other higher and professional education courses after a year of this decree's publication [3].

Along the years, universities and private and public colleges have Libras as a mandatory component for any teaching degree in their curriculum.

Regarding bilingual education, according to the Brazilian law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disability – Law nº 13.146/2015 [5], the teaching-learning process of deaf students will be carried out with Libras as the first language and, in the written modality, Portuguese Language becomes the second language, in bilingual schools and classes, and in inclusive schools. According to Godfield [6], there is no unanimity among bilingual education professionals for the deaf, because there are several ways of applying bilingualism in schools and other institutions. However, the author demonstrates two ways of defining the bilingual philosophy: the first is the sign language acquisition followed by learning the country's oral language. The second is that sign and oral languages are learned simultaneously.

The *Universidade Federal do Maranhão* (Ufma) has adjusted its Institutional Development Plan (IDP), which contemplates the obligation of Libras as a discipline for teaching degrees, Pedagogy (teaching and bachelors), and Phonoaudiology courses. In the IDP (2017 – 2021), UFMA also makes clear that the institution will offer Libras as a communicative way for employees, students, and the deaf community through trained professionals. The institution also has classes signaled by interpreters and textual productions in the Portuguese Language to enable its deaf students to access new knowledge through bilingualism.

This context has broadened the discussions about the relevance of bilingualism for making inclusive education

more effective for deaf individuals in all instances of the educational process. Comprehension by the future teacher about inclusion, bilingual education, and Libras is thus necessary.

Given what we exposed here, we question: how has the teaching-learning process been occurring in the teaching courses at the *Universidade Federal do Maranhão* under the perspective of inclusive education?

From the presented scenario and conceptions about being bilingual, this article discusses the Libras teaching-learning process in Ufma's teaching degrees in São Luís/MA/Brazil, with bilingualism in the Inclusive Education perspective as a premise.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory research with a qualitative approach, since it enabled the researchers to familiarize with the study object, as well as to know the phenomenon and describe its characteristics, establishing relationships between variables [8]. Research was conducted in the Dom Delgado campus (Ufma), a public higher education institution in São Luís/MA, maintained by the Brazilian Federal Government.

In total, the study comprised 102 participants with four being professors of the Libras course offered in the 2019.2 semester for Ufma's teaching courses: Letters/Portuguese and English language; Theater; Physical Education; Music, and 98 students enrolled in said course.

After the favorable decision of CEP/Conep/Ufma nº 3.690.353 (November 07 2019) on conducting the research, the data were collected through semi structured interviews since, according to Triviños [9], this technique "[...] favors not only the description of social phenomena, but also its explanation and comprehension in its entirety [...]. Furthermore, it also maintains the conscious and active presence of the researcher in the process of collecting information" (p. 152), as well as has more flexibility and allows the interviewer to reformulate the question aiming for a better comprehension from the interviewee, enabling to obtain knowledge regarding the Libras teaching-learning process in the Bilingualism process, maintaining the freedom of answers for all research participants.

All data collection procedures complied with the research criteria involving human beings according to the Resolution nº 510/2016 [10] of the Ethics Committee. Participants were invited, informed, briefed, and signed the Informed and Free Consent Form (TCLE), agreeing to participate in this study. Interviews were recorded with prior consent from the participants and latter transcribed. Data were categorized and analyzed qualitatively.

### III. RESULTS

Here we present the results from this research, together with the analyses and discussions necessary to the investigated context.

Therefore, regarding the question about which were the Libras course goals, 34% of the students answered that these were Libras acquisition and 64% answered that it was both the acquisition and enhancement of the Brazilian sign language. Regarding the teachers, each emitted a different opinion, that is, one teacher said that goal was Libras acquisition; another said that it was enhancement; one answered that it was both Libras acquisition and enhancement; and one emphasized learning Libras.

Given the data obtained, there is no convergence in answers. Thus, Krashen's [11] studies clarify that language acquisition happens in the daily communication occurrences, that is, relationships of spontaneous assimilation of verbal expressions and the construction of the internal grammar of each individual. The author also demonstrates that learning a new language comes from systematization, a formal study through specific methodologies and instructive materials.

For Mitchell and Myles [12], the second language (L2) is mostly learned by more cognitively mature learners and, possibly, with more strategies regarding linguistic abilities. Such a statement corroborates with the Libras discipline public in the teaching degrees, since apprentices already know and use the Portuguese Language with fluency in the daily communicative relationships and look to learn Libras for a personal reason. This learning occurs in a pre-established period for each higher education institution, which already indicates a systematization as to Libras goals in teacher's training.

According to Veloso [13], Libras acquisition occurs through a natural, subconscious, and intuitive process through assimilation, which originates from interactions and daily experiences between signers, in which the apprentice is an active participant. However, enhancing the signaled language tends to occur through the progression of the already acquired linguistic abilities, most of the times with fluency and proficiency. Therefore, signers search to evolve their Libras communicability.

Regarding the question on whether the Libras discipline in Literature courses was being offered as mandatory or elective, professors were unanimous by responding that the discipline was mandatory, but 8% of the students answered that in their courses it was an elective discipline.

In relation to the participants that stated that Libras was an elective discipline in their respective courses, it is necessary to clear two instigating situations in the Dom

Delgado campus. First, there are 17 teaching and one Phonoaudiology degrees, distributed in six centers, and only five of these courses offered Libras as a discipline in the 2019.2 semester: Letters – English, Letters– French, Music, Theater and Physical Education. For this reason, all classes were mixed with students from several courses on campus. Second, even with the obligatoriness of Libras as a discipline according to the Decree nº 5.625/2005 [4], it was offered as an elective in the Exact Sciences courses, thus was attended at the student's choice.

In the investigated context, Ufma's Institutional Development Plan makes explicit that Libras will be offered at each semester for the whole academic community, but they do not highlight their obligatoriness in the teaching, pedagogy and phonoaudiology courses. Such situation demonstrates the fragility in offering this discipline as one of the subsidies and as a prior for obtaining a higher education degree [7].

Given these facts, Nascimento and Sofiato [14] question if the "insertion of this discipline would not be masking the real necessities of forming bilingual professors to attend deaf students" (p. 365), as seen in the operationalization "fragilities" of Decree nº 5626/2005.

Therefore, we need to highlight Quadros [5] when clarifying that Libras entered as a curricular component of all universities' curriculum. This way, sign language has been of great relevance for future professors, preparing them to the teaching-learning process in the context of Inclusive Education.

Regarding how much course work exists in the Libras course for Ufma's teaching degrees and if it enabled the development of linguistic abilities, participants unanimously responded that the course work was 60 hours. Students were also unanimous when stating that the course work should be higher since the development of linguistic abilities did not surpass the basic level. Their answers converged to the professors', who answered that the course work enables a partial development of linguistic abilities; minimal acquisition; does not enable development; needs a higher course work.

Given these data, it is necessary to emphasize that Quadros [5] states that partial acquisition of linguistic abilities will hinder the comprehension on the importance of didactic resources and methodologies adapted to teaching any discipline, with classes with deaf students, considering that this situation will promote more exclusion.

In the question about whether students, who will be teachers in the future, would be capable of communicating in a bilingual way by the end of the Libras course, half the professors answered yes, since fluency results from the

fundamental information passed on and the individual commitment of every student. Further, students were able to understand and execute signs as they wrote in Portuguese Language. The other two professors emphasized that they would not because the course load is insufficient for an immersion in Libras.

Among the Libras course students, 41 stated that they would indeed be capable of communicating in both languages, since they learned the basics and could go further with practice. They also said that, even though they were not so skilled in Libras, there would be communication possibilities with deaf people; 57 students answered no to this question, because the discipline's course work is insufficient to make them bilingual.

Given these data, Quadros [15] explains that bilingual education must be organized so that students can experience the educational environment and learn equally in both languages. For Santos [16], professors must be capacitated by specific disciplines as in Libras and Special Education in this case, so that they can act in executing bilingual education.

In the same context, Albres [17] emphasized that the Libras discipline needs to focus on the linguistic abilities, bilingualism, communicability, and training of teachers under the light of inclusive education.

According to Gesser [18], Libras in the teaching degrees must also focus on the future teachers' field of work. Therefore, the specific signs of each course must be presented during the Libras teaching-learning process so that subjects are explained more equitably for both hearing and deaf students.

In agreement, Falcão [19] states that the curricular component analyzed with signaling as the central object will not enable future teachers to have the practical-theoretical basis for being an instructor on a bilingual perspective. In this context, we observe an incoherence regarding the data presented by the participants and the studies established by researchers. According to Facundo and Vitalino [20], the Libras discipline does not contemplate the possibility of becoming bilingual, especially given the minimal course work, as well as its syllabus, which privileges the repetitive signal practice. Therefore, as emphasized by Sá [21], bilingual education is a great challenge for the Brazilian educational system, since teacher qualification is still too fragile regarding linguistic diversity.

Finally, on the matter of the relevance of bilingualism to the teaching practicing in Inclusive Education, professors generally attributed the relevance of bilingualism to the novel linguistic experiences and to the inclusion of deaf people in social, educational and

professional spaces, since deaf students need to access socialized knowledge in the academic environment.

For students, bilingualism is of great relevance, since it enables the communication between student and teacher; contributes to the culture of accepting differences; enables the teaching-learning process for deaf students, since future teachers will find deaf students in their daily lives and will need both Portuguese and Libras languages for communication; bilingualism favors relations and/or communications through language between deaf and hearing people.

Thus, it is important to highlight that bilingual education is ruled by the Libras Law [3], in the Libras Decree [4], and in the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disability [5], which postulate that education for deaf people occurs with Libras as their primary language and Portuguese as their secondary language, in the written modality.

In this context, studies by Bassao and Masutti [22] describe bilingualism as extremely important for the dialogic relationship between teachers and their deaf students, since it enables new experiences in the teaching-learning process, the creation of affection and necessary bridges for understanding subjects and expanding senses. For Ferreira [23], "it is through language that people establish relationships, imposing meanings for both themselves and the environment they live in" (p. 33). Therefore, we highlight that bilingualism provides the acquirement of knowledge and experiences for the deaf person, as well as the construction of its own identity.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Returning to this study's objectives, which were to describe and understand, based on the perceptions of interviewees, how the teaching-learning process of the Brazilian Sign Language was occurring in Ufma's teaching degrees under the perspective of Inclusive Education, our findings indicate that a quality teacher training is necessary for an effective bilingual education.

In this context, we must also mention other facts we verified so that they can be reviewed, reflected upon, and modified for the benefit of the initial education of students and future teachers of the target students of Special/Inclusive Education.

At Ufma, there are 17 teaching degrees but only five offer the Libras discipline to students, which points to the lack of compliance to the Decree 5626/05, which assures Libras as a mandatory discipline for all teaching courses in all knowledge fields. This is concerning considering it compromises the education of students and future teachers in the principles of Inclusive Education and in the context



of bilingual education due to the absence of knowledge and experiences regarding Libras, deafness and deaf people. In the future, this may result in disoriented, exclusive, and oral professional practices in the teaching-learning process of deaf and hearing-impaired students.

In the Libras course plans analyzed, even though several syllabi are similar for all courses and the subjects' presentations are similar, there is no precise information regarding the course goals, specifically if the goals are acquisition or improvement and/or both. The Libras discipline was offered in some courses as an elective instead of mandatory as required by Decree nº 5626/2005.

The course work of this discipline is below the necessary regarding the bilingualism context, since most of the students highlighted that it only allows them to reach a basic communication level. This allows us to infer that many of these students will leave academia without the proper education to work with the target public of Special Education, specifically deaf students. This context will not support an equitable education between hearing and deaf students. Therefore, these will be new professionals with old exclusion practices.

By the end of the Libras discipline, most participants do not feel capable of bilingual communication because they consider their learning to be at the basic level.

Regarding the relevance of bilingualism, this is seen as of extreme importance since it enables the information and communication between hearing and deaf people, as well as the access to the knowledge produced and socialized in the academic environment.

Given what we outlined here, we make a few considerations with the intent of bringing changes in benefit of the teaching-learning process of Libras in the Ufma's teaching degrees under the perspective of Inclusive Education. These include: restructuring of the Brazilian Sign Language discipline syllabus with a clear and precise definition of its outcomes; increased course work; effective insertion of Digital Technologies in classes and practical Libras activities; increased offer of Libras classes per semester; exchange between people fluent in Libras, as well as professors of different areas who have experience with deaf people; talks and presentations in associations of people with hearing disabilities; technical and pedagogical supervision regarding the Libras discipline in the teacher training courses as a mandatory requisite.

We also expect that this study will instigate the academic community and society in general to acknowledge the relevance of bilingualism to the educational, social, and professional inclusion of the deaf person.

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